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POWER AND CULTURE IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

by

William S. Denham, Lieutenant Colonel, United States Air Force

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Advisor: Dr. Dawn Murphy

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Biography

Lieutenant Colonel William Denham is assigned to the Air War College, Air University, Maxwell AFB, AL. Lt Col Denham is a 1995 graduate of the Air Force Academy. He completed Euro-NATO Joint Jet Pilot Training at Sheppard AFB, TX and was selected to fly the F-15C. He went on to fly combat missions in Operation Allied Force and has flown the F-15C while based in the United Kingdom, Alaska, and Japan. He earned a Masters of Arts in National Security Affairs from the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, CA. He has also worked in the House of Representatives as an Air Force Legislative Liaison. His most recent assignment was as squadron commander of the 67th Fighter Squadron at Kadena AB, Okinawa, Japan.

Abstract

China is pursuing an island-building campaign across the South China Sea in support of its sovereignty claims that date from 1951. This is a contested air and maritime domain between China and the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Republic of China. The United States must make difficult foreign policy choices that will be informed by the analytical lens its leaders choose to assess China's actions. This essay uses two analytical lenses, Confucian strategic culture and offensive realism, to assess Chinese behavior in three test cases: Paracel Islands in 1974, Fiery Cross Reef and Johnson Reef in 1988, and Mischief Reef in 1994. It finds that the test cases clearly show that Chinese strategic choice aligns with offensive realism. If Chinese behavior is shaped by shifts and opportunities in the balance of power, then recommendations become straightforward. The United States is the only nation capable of balancing against China in the South China Sea. However, the proclaimed rebalance to the Pacific has done little to affect power dynamics in the region. The United States must aggressively pursue cooperation, basing, and training with our partners in Southeast Asia in order to rectify the current imbalance.

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Introduction

In September 2015, American, Chinese, and Japanese admirals gathered in London for a conference. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) representative, Vice Adm. Yuan Yubai, set out an uncompromising and definitive statement of the People's Republic of China (PRC) position: "The South China Sea, as the name indicated, is a sea area. It belongs to China."[1] This claim and the actions the PRC has undertaken to enforce that claim are this essay's focus. Specifically, the essay attempts to assess which model would best serve policy-makers in analyzing China's behavior in the South China Sea. This is not a matter of armchair academic theorizing – rather, the chosen analytical lens can lead to foreign policy choices that either maintain stability in East Asia or risk an upheaval of the international system and norms.

China's historic association with the teaching of Confucius has led some analysts to suggest that the PRC has inherited a strategic culture that reflects Confucian principles. Specifically, this strategic culture is associated with antimilitarism and a defensive grand strategy.[2] Another useful lens draws it lineage from realism. Offensive realism is a strand of realism that is particularly useful since it makes testable predictions and its primary advocate, John Mearsheimer, has staked out positions on the theory's expectations with regards to China. Offensive realism states that great powers will seek to maximize their power over their neighbors in a bid to establish regional hegemony.

This essay uses the framework of these two competing lenses to evaluate PRC behavior in the South China Sea using three separate cases: Paracel Islands in 1974, Fiery Cross Reef and Johnson Reef in 1988, and Mischief Reef in 1994. This essay first explains the competing theories and methodology, and then tests Confucian strategic culture and offensive realism against each of these cases. It finds that offensive realism is the most compelling analytical tool

to understand and predict Beijing's decisions and actions in the South China Sea. I conclude with a summary of findings, implications, and recommendations for United States policy.

Theory Overview

The existing literature on strategic culture produces an amorphous concept. Scholars disagree on its definition, sources, how to select or reject historical periods, and how it changes through time. Even if some agree that strategic culture exists, there is further debate over the extent to which it affects strategic choice.[3] As to the definition, Alistair Johnston defines strategic culture as "consistent and persistent historical patterns in the way particular states (or state elites) think about the use of force for political ends."[4] Jack Snyder, who pioneered the field of strategic culture by assessing the USSR, wrote that strategic culture is "the sum total of ideas, conditioned emotional responses, patterns of habitual behavior that members of a national strategic community have acquired through instruction or imitation."[5] Finally, from a scholar who is more skeptical of the usefulness of strategic culture, Patrick Porter contends that it is "an ambiguous repertoire of competing ideas that can be selected, instrumentalised, and manipulated, instead of a clear script for action."[6]

Yuan-Kang Wang tested Confucianism in his study *Harmony and War* where he found that structural realism was a superior model to either Confucian pacifism or cultural realism.[7] This essay extends the outlines of his framework – assessed against the Song and Ming dynasties – to the current day. Regarding the use of force, Wang hypothesized that a Confucian strategic culture would have the following characteristics : (1) "prefer nonviolent means," (2) use force "only after being attacked," (3) "rarely strikes preemptively or preventively," (4) "use of force is a last resort," and (5) demonstrate a "serious, nontrivial reluctance before the use of force."[8]

John Mearsheimer defined the theory of offensive realism in his 2001 book, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. As the title infers, he is concerned specifically with the behavior of great powers. He builds upon the realist tradition while also ensuring his particular strain is distinct. His theory has both similarities and differences with the seminal realist works: the classical realist view by Hans Morgenthau in *Politics Among Nations* and Kenneth Waltz's defensive realism exposited in his *Theory of International Politics*.[9] Morgenthau theorizes that all states have an innate desire for power due to human nature, a "limitless lust for power."[10] While Mearsheimer agrees with Morgenthau on how states will behave, the source of that behavior according to Mearsheimer is the anarchy of the international system, not human nature. And while Waltz and Mearsheimer agree that the international system is the fount of state behavior, they part ways on how states react to that system. For Waltz, anarchy produces a "defensive realism" which posits that states are more concerned with maintaining status quo and that aggressive behavior typically does not benefit the aggressor.[11] But for Mearsheimer, that same anarchy produces a need for survival which prompts aggression.

Fear of other great powers leads to self-help and thus power maximizing behavior. Mearsheimer emphasizes that his theory predicts relative power maximization, that is, that in order to be secure, great powers will seek to maximize power relative to their neighbors and any potential rivals.[12] It is also important to note that offensive realism does not mean that states are "mindless aggressors," as Mearsheimer puts it.[13] Rather, they are rational actors that are acutely aware of the balance of power, so aggression must be well-timed and calculated to benefit over the long-term. In essence, offensive realism expects states to be aggressive only when the time is right for them.

Methodology

A test needs to be established to assess whether China's behavior across the selected cases is a result of Confucian strategic culture or offensive realism. If China is behaving in accordance with a Confucian strategic culture, we should expect to see an attempt to solve its maritime disputes in an overall defensive manner where the use of force would be "reluctant, reactive, and defensive."[14] Furthermore, "a strong China will not behave aggressively toward others, nor will it be an expansionist power—even though its capabilities to do so have increased."[15] Therefore, if China behaves according to Confucian strategic culture, we should expect to see minimal use of force and lack of an expansionist tendency.

But on the other hand, if China is behaving in accordance with the theory of offensive realism, we should expect it to pursue power maximization with a goal of local hegemony. We should not expect to see "mindless aggression," but shrewd timing to ensure they optimize their chance for success.

Finally, the definition of aggressive behavior must be addressed to complete the methodology. That is, is China being aggressive if it does not engage in combat? Here, I agree with Scobell that coercive diplomacy still constitutes a "use of force." In his definition, "neither actual combat nor a declaration of war is necessary."[16] A military showdown that does not result in missiles fired or rounds downrange is still a strategically risky choice that invites actual military engagement. It should be noted that this is different from M. Taylor Fravel's definition, in which "use of force" comprises only "occupation of territory or a blockade, raid, clash, or war."[17] Now the task is to assess each case and evaluate these competing claims.

Paracel Islands 1974

China and Vietnam clashed over the Paracel Islands in 1974 and engaged in maritime combat on January 19. South Vietnam employed three destroyers and one frigate, while China used two submarine chasers and two minesweepers. The end result was a sunk frigate and damaged destroyer on the Vietnamese side and resultant occupation of the Crescent Group of islands in the southwest of the Paracels by the PRC.[18]

The conflict over the Paracel Islands extends back to 1950, when China first occupied Woody Island of the Amphrite Group in the northeast of the Paracels. At that time, France was occupying the Crescent Group which was subsequently given to South Vietnam in 1956. Saigon exerted firmer control by expelling Chinese fishermen found among the Crescent Group in 1959. At this time, according to Fravel, the situation became somewhat static. According to his narrative, the next phase of the crisis was driven by the discovery of hydrocarbon reserves in the South China Sea,[19] but there is analysis that suggests otherwise. Marwyn Samuels points out that "the prospects for offshore oil could only have been a highly tentative motivation for China's actions in 1974," due to the fact that there had been no thorough seismic evaluations of the Paracels by 1974.[20] The implications for this are discussed shortly.

Leaving the debate on why China intervened in 1974 aside momentarily, it is true that the situation become somewhat static in the period 1959-1973. What would a Confucian model of strategic behavior expect in this situation? When the situation stabilized, following a Confucian model of "aversion to violence" and "defensive and noncoercive measures,"[21] we should expect to see some form of behavior demonstrating reluctance to use force and seeking resolution through some other means. However, there is no record of any diplomatic advances by the PRC to South Vietnam to discuss differences or negotiate. Further, there is no record of direct South

Vietnamese attack on the PRC that would incite a direct response by the PRC that would be understandable under a Confucian strategic model. In fact, the most direct cause of the incident was a deliberate provoking on the part of China by sending "fishermen-militia" deliberately into the Crescent Group claimed and patrolled by South Vietnam, even going so far as to raise Chinese flags on Robert and Drummond islands within the Crescent Group. These incursions occurred from 11 to 16 January, and were quickly followed on the 16th by an official statement from Saigon rebuking Chinese actions. [22] This set the stage for combat on 19 and 20 January in which Chinese forces routed the South Vietnamese with resultant occupation of all the Paracels.

Therefore, it is difficult to detect any influence from Confucian strategic culture in this episode. What of offensive realism? Offensive realism dictates that China's interest lay in maximizing relative power and becoming the regional hegemon. Although the Paracel incident without doubt took place in the context of oil exploration in the Spratlys, the Crescent Group of the Paracels was not critical to any resource. Also, even though the historic squabble between China and Vietnam – that exploded in a much bigger fashion along their shared land border five years later in 1979 – was also decidedly a factor, it does not explain why the conflict was essentially dormant for 15 years from 1959-1973. The most persuasive reason for the outbreak of conflict in 1974 was the change in relative power in the South China Sea. The détente between the United States and China had been officially realized in the communique of 1972, which meant that the threat of US intervention in the Paracels was much reduced. Indeed, it would seem that Chinese calculation of American reaction was pristine as US personnel in the region of the Paracels and the Spratlys were in fact ordered to withdraw and the US Seventh Fleet was ordered to be neutral. In Samuel's analysis, the United States was ultimately only an

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"interested bystander" to the conflict.[23] Thus, with the United States largely out of the picture, Beijing went on the offensive in the Paracels when the power balance had tilted to its advantage.

To be sure, this offensive action caused consternation in the United States as the behavior seemed to be out of character with Chinese foreign policy. *Newsweek* opined that the "tigerish handling of the Paracels question deviated from [Premier] Chou's normal preference for letting such disputes stew while he contemplates alternatives."[24] But this offensive episode was only the beginning of China's aggressiveness as the balance of power continued to favor the PRC.

Fiery Cross Reef and Johnson Reef, 1988

The Spratlys, consisting of small islands, reefs, and other features, is currently claimed by China, Vietnam, the Philippines, the Republic of China (ROC), and Malaysia. The PRC did not occupy any territory in the Spratlys until a window of opportunity emerged in 1987. At a March 1987 meeting of the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission of the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the PRC agreed to build an observation post in the Spratly Islands. The records of this meeting leave unclear whether the PRC pushed for this measure or it was offered to them, but this is largely irrelevant; what is clear is that China acted swiftly upon this opening. The UNESCO pretext was referred to as an "imperial sword" in a PLA history. Indeed, in the very next month of April, China sent out its very first PLAN combat patrol of the South China Sea, and also used research vessels to decide on Fiery Cross Reef as the home for their observation post.[25]

Although we have no CMC deliberations to sift and thereby determine motives and planning, this was a significant undertaking that the PRC surely understood – for at least two reasons – would provoke a reaction from surrounding powers. First, there is no record of any

Chinese occupation of Spratly Islands – historic or modern – prior to this 1988 move. However, China began declaring sovereignty over the Paracels and the Spratlys as early as August of 1951. As the New York Times recorded on 16 August 1951, "Mr. Chou proclaimed Chinese sovereignty over Spratley [sic] Island in the South China Sea as well as the Paracels, Formosa, and the Pescadores."[26] This claim over the Spratlys in 1951 was expansionist by itself. A 1928 official Chinese report described the Paracels as the "nation's southernmost territory," which pointedly leaves the Spratlys as unclaimed by China. As Marwyn Samuels concludes, the PRC claim on the Spratlys was a "legacy of World War II and the devolution of the Japanese Empire."[27] Second, despite the 1951 PRC sovereignty claim over the entire South China Sea,[28] actually occupying the Spratlys was a decidedly more aggressive move than their consolidation of the Paracels simply due to the distance involved. The Paracels are 150 nautical miles from the southern tip of Hainan Island, but Fiery Cross Reef is over 550 nautical miles away. This tripling of distance manifested both a PRC offensive mindset as well as the PLAN's growing capability.[29]

With increased naval capability in addition to a useful pretext, the navy developed a plan to not only occupy Fiery Cross but also eight additional reefs. This plan was submitted to the CMC in August of 1987. Approval was granted to the PLAN by the CMC in November, and Chinese forces first arrived on Fiery Cross in mid-January 1988.[30] The PRC was nearly immediately challenged on the 31st of that month when Vietnamese naval forces attempted to land on Fiery Cross Reef but were thwarted by the PLAN without any shots fired. In February, both sides landed personnel on Cuarteron Reef in an effort to claim the feature. Both sides planted flags but the Vietnamese eventually left, apparently due to weather. Finally, in mid-March, again both sides landed military personnel on Johnson Reef. This time, they confronted

one another and shots were fired – and of course, accounts from Vietnam and China differ on who landed first. The PLAN had massed superior seapower in the area, deploying three destroyers compared to three Vietnamese freighters and landing craft. The battle was soon over and China was left in control of Johnson Reef, while Vietnam lost all three vessels as well as the lives of 74 sailors.[31]

What of a Confucian strategic culture in this episode? The Spratlys are clearly a case of competing claims of sovereignty. Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, the PRC, and the ROC all now have staked out claims by occupying certain features of the Spratlys. In 1987, Vietnam and the Philippines had a several year lead in occupying the Spratlys. It is difficult to label this action as defensive in any sort of the word. No Chinese force had come under attack from Philippine, Vietnamese, or ROC aggression acting out of the Spratlys. It is possible to think of this as defensive only if the Chinese claim had overwhelming evidence, or the other claimants were somehow directly affecting Chinese national security. Neither of these conditions are true.

Was the use of force here reluctant or the last resort? The timing of the Chinese foray onto Fiery Cross Reef is instead indicative of power considerations and windows of opportunity. Again, there are no diplomatic attempts to engage in negotiations, only the Chinese claim to "indisputable sovereignty." Reluctance would have the characteristics of having the power to intervene but investigating all other options before using force. But the timing of both Chinese ability and the UNESCO pretext suggest that China moved into the Spratlys as soon as they had the force to do so, and interestingly, once they had a rationale that carried some international legitimacy. This is an important aside, because it suggests that even Beijing harbored doubts on the international legitimacy of its own proclamation on sovereignty over the Spratlys – after all, a territory that is "indisputably" yours should not require the blessing of a UN agency to occupy.

Using the window of opportunity given by growing naval power instead tracks better with the expectations of offensive realism. As Chinese maritime capacity and proficiency gained, as evidenced by the first combat patrol of the South China Sea being completed in April 1987,[32] they used a window of opportunity to join the other nations scrambling for a foothold in the Spratly Islands.

The selection of Fiery Cross itself also seems to be shaped by power considerations. As noted above, the original plan called for the occupation of nine different features, all of them currently unoccupied. Fiery Cross is on the far west of the archipelago, well away from the Philippines and as Fravel states, "unoccupied and isolated from features held by other states, suggesting that China sought to minimize the diplomatic fallout from its occupation of disputed territory."[33] His logic is sound, since a direct confrontation campaign of attempting to evict other claimants from reefs would have been a risky proposition – if unsuccessful, China's overall claims would be put in jeopardy. Instead, the PRC utilized a window of opportunity to expand in the South China Sea as their military capability permitted them to do so. Establishing a foothold in the Spratlys was a key step towards regional hegemony for China.

Finally, it also must be noted that this move into the Spratlys occurred within the context of oil exploration. Thus, there is a convergence of interest in the South China Sea for the PRC; on the one hand, a matter of national pride and honor dating from their 1951 sovereignty claim that they have never negotiated on, and secondly, an economic interest that is directly tied to power. Hydrocarbon sources support national power, specifically economic and military power. An economy cannot grow without energy, and a modern military is dependent on its nation's economy, while also being unable to operate without multiple petroleum products, from jet fuel to diesel and all manner of lubricants for engines, weapons, etc. Thus in the realm of relative

power, Chinese behavior is consistent with the offensive realism paradigm due to competition for limited resources between neighboring powers. The presence of oil or gas then, is an intensifying element to the competition for power between all the claimants on the South China Sea. The first well drilled in the Spratly archipelago was by a Philippine-Swedish venture in 1976.[34] Chinese scientists of the State Oceanographic Administration (SOA) surveyed the Spratlys in the 1980s for petroleum, and announced the presence of large amounts of oil in the Spratlys in the Chinese press in July and November of 1987.[35] Thus, the stage was set for China to use force in the Spratlys not only to reinforce its sovereignty claims but also to ensure that it did not lose any relative power with respect to petroleum access.

Mischief Reef 1994 and the Second Thomas Shoal

The final case is an extension of PRC occupation of the Spratlys, but this time onto a reef on the far east of the archipelago, extremely close to the Philippines. Mischief Reef lies approximately 605 nautical miles away from the nearest portion of Chinese mainland on Hainan Island, and 125 nautical miles away from the nearest Philippine mainland of Palawan. Thus this was a more aggressive move in terms of proximity to another state's coastline. However, it did not result in any combat between China and the Philippines or Vietnam. This remains a relatively minor incident and is consistent with the behavior of other South China Sea claimants in occupation of features of the Spratlys, which currently host forces of the PRC, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and the ROC.

But this was still armed coercion using Scobell's definition of armed force. Furthermore, it has led to increased tension between the PRC and the Philippines, with a potential flashpoint on the Second Thomas Shoal. The Second Thomas Shoal is a reef on which the Philippines

deliberately ran aground in 1999 a World War II landing ship, the BRP *Sierra Madre*. Since that time, Manila has kept a small contingent of marines on board the ship to reinforce its own sovereignty claims and ensure the PRC does not also claim this reef. This has led to an increased risk of a military confrontation between the Philippines and the PRC. The PRC Coast Guard continually attempts to prevent any ships from provisioning the *Sierra Madre* with fresh supplies and rotation of troops. Two Chinese coast guard cutters continually guard the reef, but Filipino smaller supply boats eventually get through.[36]

This case, though minor, is relevant because of the proximity to the Philippines. Whereas Fiery Cross was on the west side of the archipelago in a relatively uncontested area, by seizing Mischief Reef the PRC advanced their hold on Spratly Islands over 150 nautical miles to the east, only 125 nautical miles away from Palawan. Again applying our two competing lenses to this move, Confucian strategic culture seems absent. This was an aggressive move very close to a competing claimant on the South China Sea. If this was a defensive move, it was not perceived that way in Manila, and the subsequent grounding of the *Sierra Madre* is the best evidence for this. The decision to occupy Mischief Reef does seem to reflect an expansionist tendency as expected by offensive realism, especially since satellite imagery from September 2015 shows that China is in the beginning phases of construction on Mischief Reef that are similar to other airfield projects in the South China Sea.[37] Building yet another airstrip in this highly contested area is about power projection and eventual reinforced military capability – no other explanation makes sense.

Conclusion

Offensive realism, though not an encouraging verdict, is the best tool for understanding Chinese behavior in the South China Sea from at least the 1970s. China has expanded its island and reef perimeter by using force, including direct combat. The clash in the Paracels demonstrated the PRC's shrewd timing and analysis of the balance of power. In further combat with Vietnam over Fiery Cross and Johnson Reef, Beijing showed aggressive reach and exploitation of windows of opportunity. Mischief Reef exhibited China's willingness to provoke another South China Sea claimant in order to further expand their control of the area. Besides the test cases, recent headlines and imagery confirm that the PRC has completed airfields on both Fiery Cross Reef and Subi Reef, and also suggests that the PRC intends to turn Mischief Reef into an airfield as well.[38] Three different airfields in the Spratlys alone can best be explained by a desire to maximize relative power. This is not to say that the other South China Sea claimants are somehow more pacific than China – it goes beyond the scope of this essay but it seems safe to say that the South China Sea has been a virtual playground for offensive realism, where all players have consistently attempted to maximize power at each other's expense, expanding by creating *de facto* effects on the reefs, shoals, and atolls of a disputed maritime domain, and thereby substantiating the cliché that possession is nine-tenths of the law. But two items must be acknowledged that could challenge this analysis.

First, we have no evidence of CMC deliberations to sift and sort out the precise rationales offered, accepted, or rejected in China's military decision making council. Without this, it is impossible to say for certain why the PRC has advanced on its path, and whether their internal dialogue was characterized by power or cultural dynamics. Thus, this essay can only analyze actions.

Second, how one assesses the assertiveness or aggressiveness of PRC actions depends very much on the degree of weighted validity one gives to PRC sovereignty claims. For instance, one might say that China's actions in the South China Sea are indeed understandable from a Confucian perspective because their sovereignty claims are valid, and in essence they are only responding to an attack on their territory. But this perspective must be placed in context of both the substance of their claim as well as what it is they are claiming. The detailed substance of the claim is best explored in other volumes,[39] but it is a difficult claim to justify given its highly contested nature and the proximity of its claim to neighboring countries. Samuels concludes that a post-World War II power vacuum created this scenario, stating that "the modern contest for the islands is a function of that vacuum and, in turn, reflects the larger contest for power in post-war Asia."[40] Claiming sovereignty due to historic fishing is also problematic since it is not unusual for peoples to fish far beyond their borders of what we currently accept as sovereign territory. The claiming of features which are primarily submerged is yet another complicating issue.[41]

What of the response of the United States to these developments? Since this is a struggle for power, it only makes sense to balance China's growing regional dominance. By population, GDP, air forces, and naval forces, the PRC dwarfs its neighbors in the South China Sea. The United States is the only nation capable of creating balance. Meanwhile, the United States has proclaimed a pivot, or rebalance to the Pacific area. On the economic side of the ledger, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) is a good step forward to reassure our allies and partners that Pacific prosperity is one of our priorities. But on the military side, there is little to no change in actual force structure. To correct the imbalance, cooperation, training, and basing must be pursued with the Philippines, Malaysia, and Vietnam. Critics will cite exasperation of the

security dilemma, but PRC militarization of the South China Sea is *prima facie* evidence that the security dilemma is already going full speed. Specifically, with our best and longest partner, the Philippines, we must pursue a strategy that allows the USAF to deploy and train at Clark Air Base, and the USN to reestablish a permanent presence in Subic Bay. Just as the United States has underwritten stability in East Asia since the end of World War II, it has the responsibility today of ensuring freedom of navigation in the air and the seas, but with a more durable presence than the occasional foray by a destroyer or reconnaissance flights. Tactical assets must be in theater to reassure and deter.

Even though the heuristic of offensive realism is by definition uncomplicated, it would be foolish to not heed its analysis. First, we do not know at this point exactly what China's priorities are and how deeply they are willing to defend them. Second, the extent of our interests may deepen as globalization continues. Third, it will do no harm to establish a balance-of-power in the South China Sea. This is true because the security dilemma is already in play as noted above. Fourth, we do not know the normative impacts on other disputed maritime areas that our muted response to the South China Sea may be influencing. With Russia following the China model in the Kurile Islands, what other great powers may be tempted to do the same if we allow a new norm to establish with regards to maritime expansion vis-à-vis the Chinese model currently in play in the South China Sea? Fifth, what if Taiwan reunifies with the mainland, whether peacefully or by force? Whether the United States would intervene in a PRC military invasion of Taiwan has been deliberately left in the ether of strategic ambiguity, but the more important consideration is how our allies Japan and South Korea would fare if China possessed both Taiwan and the South China Sea. Controlling that maritime space would leave Japan and South Korea highly vulnerable to Chinese coercion through force projection and control of

shipping lanes. When compared to a plan of steady diplomacy buttressed by a rebalance of

power, the current vector of all talk and no action simply accrues more risk.

As Mearsheimer predicted in 2001, "a wealthy China would not be a status quo power

but an aggressive state determined to achieve regional hegemony."[42] Thousands of years ago

Thucydides noted in yet another maritime dispute that "the standard of justice depends on the

equality of power to compel and that in fact the strong do what they have the power to do and the

weak accept what they have to accept."[43] This plain-spoken articulation of power from the

Melian dialogue matches PRC behavior in the South China Sea today. If the United States

desires to maintain a voice in this critical area of the world, it must recognize the classic power-

struggle dynamics and respond accordingly.

Notes

[1] Marcus Weisgerber, "Defiant Chinese Admiral's Message: South China Sea 'Belongs to China,'" *Defenseone.com*, 14 September 2015, http://www.defenseone.com/threats/2015/09/defiant-chinese-admirals-message-south-china-sea-belongs-china/120989/.

[2] Yuan-Kang Wang, *Harmony and War: Confucian Culture and Chinese Power Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press), 15. Recent studies have assessed China's strategic culture within a specific historical time frame, such as Alastair Iain Johnston's *Cultural Realism* (1995) which investigated the Ming dynasty, or Yuan-Kang Wang's *Harmony and War* (2010) which analyzed both the Song and Ming. Andrew Scobell's *China's Use of Military Force* focused on strategic culture in twentieth-century events such as Korea and the 1979 war with Vietnam.

[3] Alistair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 14.

[4] Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, 1.

[5] As quoted in Patrick Porter, *Military Orientalism: Eastern War Through Western Eyes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 207.

[6] Porter, 15. Besides the varying definitions of strategic culture, there is also a wide array of perspectives of what that strategic culture might be. Johnston has proposed a "cultural realist" model of strategic culture which analyzes Chinese strategic choice as realist and *realpolitik* in essence, but identifies the source as their culture, not the anarchy of the international system as do most realist models. His model presents difficulties since without first-hand insight into the decision making process, it is near impossible to disentangle the motives from the behavior. Given the current opacity of Chinese foreign policy decisions, it is simply not viable to test for this model in the modern period. But Johnston's concept is less popular than the highly prevalent idea of a Confucian strategic culture – the model used in this essay.

[7] Yuan-Kang Wang, *Harmony and War: Confucian Culture and Chinese Power Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press), 10. I am very much indebted to Yuan-Kang Wang's work. This paper is in essence a very small continuation of his work of analysis across the Song and Ming Dynasties. I leaned particularly heavily on his framework for assessing Confucian strategic culture.

[8] Wang, 31.

[9] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 19.

[10] As quoted in Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 19.

[11] Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 20.

[12] Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 32-36.

[13] Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 37.

[14] Wang, *Harmony and War*, 4.

[15] Wang, *Harmony and War*, 4.

[16] Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 10.

[17] M. Taylor Fravel, "Power Shifts and Escalation: Explaining China's Use of Force in Territorial Disputes" *International Security* 32 no. 3 (Winter, 2007/2008): 53.

[18] Alexander C. Huang, "The PLA Navy at War, 1949-1999" in *Chinese Warfighting: The PLA Experience since 1949*, by Mark A. Ryan, David M. Finkelstein and Michael A. McDevitt (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2003), 262.

[19] Fravel, "Power Shifts and Escalation: Explaining China's Use of Force in Territorial Disputes," 74.

[20] Marwyn S. Samuels, *Contest for the South China Sea* (New York: Methuen, 1982), 112.

[21] Wang, 13.

[22] Samuels, 100.

[23] Samuels, 111.

[24] *Newsweek,* 4 February 1974, 10, as quoted in Samuels, 110-111.

[25] M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 292.

[26] Special to the *New York Times*, "Bid Issued by Chou," *New York Times*, 17 August 1951.

[27] Samuels, 68.

[28] M. Taylor Fravel, "China's Strategy in the South China Sea," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33, no. 2 (2011): 293.

[29] Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 290-292. This increase in naval capacity and proficiency was demonstrated in the run-up to the 1988 move in several notable ways: (1) the PLAN recovered ICBM test missiles from the South Pacific in May and June of 1980, (2) in a show of force exploited for propaganda, the PLAN's South Sea Fleet sailed to the Spratly's for the first time in 1983, and (3) the PLAN patrolled the South Pole in 1984 and Antarctica in 1985.

[30] Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 293.

[31] Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 295.

[32] Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 293.

[33] Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 293.

[34] Samuels, 157.

[35] Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 289.

[36] Armando J. Heredia, "Analysis: Growing The Philippines South China Sea Outpost," *USNI News*, 20 July 2015, http://news.usni.org/2015/07/20/analysis-growing-the-philippines-south-china-sea-outpost.

[37] Gregory Poling, "Spratley Airstrip Update: Is Mischief Reef Next?," *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, http://amti.csis.org/new-imagery-release/.

[38] Gregory Poling, "Spratley Airstrip Update: Is Mischief Reef Next?," *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, http://amti.csis.org/new-imagery-release/.

[39] See Marwyn S. Samuels, *Contest for the South China Sea*. Chapters two through five provide an excellent historical overview that addresses multiple facets of the sovereignty issue.

[40] Samuels, 69.

[41] As an interesting aside, another result of this study that does challenge an aspect of Mearsheimer's work is his emphasis on the primacy of land power, that is, a nation's army. Indeed, in what is being called "the 21st century's defining battleground" by Robert Kaplan, land power is largely irrelevant. As Samuels pointed out, PRC moves in 1974 were the result of a new initiative to bolster their maritime presence. Samuels recounts that PRC maritime status was "shaped by China's historic ambivalence as a sea power, but also re-shaped in the early 1970s by the emergence of a new and broadly assertive Chinese ocean policy." (p. 112) Therefore, what we find in the South China Sea is the emergence of the importance both air and naval power. Notably, China's island building campaign seems particularly devoted to airpower, as extension of reefs and shoals have primarily served the purpose of building runways. That being said, none of Mearsheimer's assumptions supporting offensive realism depend on the additional theorem of the primacy of land power – what we see in the South China Sea is offensive realism enacted through the demands of maritime disputes, namely through air and sea domains.

[42] Mearsheimer, 402.

[43] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner, ed. M.I. Finley (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 402.

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